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Cross-cultural Translatability: Challenges and Prospects

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In our quest of a new paradigm for cultural or cross-cultural understanding, we must first take a look at the very concept of a paradigm, as Thomas Kuhn expounded in his celebrated book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, and the related concepts of incommensurability and untranslatability. Kuhn's concepts have a significant influence on social sciences and the humanities, and they put an overemphasis on the difference and the impossibility of communication among different groups and cultures. Such a tendency has led to the fragmentization of the social fabric and the resurgence of a most tenacious tribalism. This essay launches a critique of such concepts and argues for the possibility and validity of cross-cultural understanding, and proposes world literature as an opportunity to embrace cross-cultural translatability as the first step towards a new paradigm in the study of different cultures in our globalized world today.

Since early in human history, translation has always served the human needs of communication across linguistic and cultural differences. It is not just between languages that we need translation, but even within the same language. Ancient texts in the 'same' language are as difficult to understand as foreign texts, so translation is the necessary means to overcome the distance in time as well as that in space. Properly understood, translation, as George Steiner argues,

> is a special case of the arc of communication which every successful speech-act closes within a given language. On the inter-lingual level, translation will pose concentrated, visibly intractable problems; but these same problems abound, at a more covert or conventionally neglected level, intra-lingually.... In short: *inside or between languages, human communication equals translation*.[1]

In that broad sense, then, translation has always worked since human communication has always happened throughout history, even though with varying degrees of success. In much of contemporary theoretical discourse, however, and in the intellectual climate that puts so much emphasis on difference of all kinds, the concept of *untranslatability* is often proposed as a challenge to the kind of universalism

presumably implicit in the very idea of translation. When we think about cross-cultural understanding and communication, the idea of untranslatability poses a serious challenge that must be taken seriously before we can move on.

Let us take one prominent example. In the 50 years since its appearance, Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, first published in 1962, with a second and enlarged edition in 1970 and followed by many reprints, has had a tremendous impact on literary and cultural studies far beyond its original purpose of understanding specific changes in the history of science. Two concepts in that book – paradigm and incommensurability – are particularly influential and are instrumental in formulating the concept of untranslatability, which Kuhn held on to even when he had revised his original theory in his last book, published in 2000 and entitled *The Road since Structure*. When we talk about cross-cultural understanding and try to find a new paradigm in this endeavour, we must first answer the crucial question of whether cultures can communicate with one another beyond linguistic and cultural differences, and we must examine the concept of paradigm itself, which has been so much influenced by Kuhn's understanding of this term in his theory about the structure of scientific revolution. Therefore, we must face the challenge of the notions of paradigm, incommensurability, and untranslatability, which Kuhn expounded in his works.

Kuhn's concept of scientific revolution is a sudden rupture, a complete breakthrough, the superseding of the old paradigm by the new. He argues that different paradigms represent totally incommensurate modes of thinking and understanding; so much so that scientists operating under different paradigms do not speak the same language and therefore cannot communicate with one another. Indeed, the paradigmatic change is so great that 'after a revolution,' says Kuhn, 'scientists work in a different world.'[2] That is in effect what he means by the incommensurability of paradigms, but that is surely an exaggeration of the difference between, say, the Ptolemaic geocentric view and the Copernican heliocentric view. The fact that there could be a heated debate between the two schools of astronomers proved precisely that they knew exactly what the other side was talking about and how fundamentally the opposing view was challenging their own fundamental belief. Those who subscribed to the Copernican or the Ptolemaic theories of the movement of heavenly bodies certainly differed radically from one another, but the difference of paradigms, as Hilary Putnam argues, 'does *not* mean that there is no "common language" in which one can say what the theoretical terms of both theories refer to.'[3] Debate is also communication, and an effective debate depends on adequate understanding of what the opposing view is and how it differs from one's own, and thus it presupposes a common language within which difference can be identified and a counterargument can be formulated. Therefore, it is neither historically accurate nor theoretically valid to claim that different paradigms are totally incommensurable, sharing no common language. Unfortunately, however, that is exactly the way Kuhn's concept of incommensurability is understood and has its influence when it is borrowed in literary and cultural studies. When talking about understanding across linguistic and cultural boundaries, many scholars draw on Kuhn's concept of incommensurability and hold

the view that cultural habits and customs imbedded in social, national, racial, religious and other such differences are so fundamental that translation and communication become impossible. Even in translation studies, untranslatability becomes a theoretically more influential concept than the history and reality of translation.

Incommensurability encourages a dichotomous view of cultures and societies and thus precipitates the fragmentization of the social fabric and the isolation of different groups. Perhaps for that reason, Lindsay Waters has offered a very strong critique of the concept of incommensurability. Waters first argues that ideas have their effect on human understanding and thus human action, and once an idea – particularly an influential idea – becomes prevalent, it may have significant consequences on human life in actuality. In this sense, then, 'the decision to say that the many kinds of human life are so utterly different as to be absolutely "incommensurable," because they have nothing in common, might have a considerable effect, possibly liberating, but more likely damaging, on human life itself.' Waters makes it clear that ideas are not just mental speculations, and it is from the point of view of one's moral and social 'responsibility' that ideas like incommensurability need to be carefully thought through. 'Incommensurability is an idea, I contend, that has had consequences far beyond the seemingly arcane and certainly small world of the history and philosophy of science where it originated,' says Waters. 'Looking at its career reveals the danger that confusing epistemology with ethics puts one's self and others into.'[4] This is something of a fresh insight, because far too much academic theorizing is like the proverbial snake that swallows its own tail in a circular movement without paying much attention to what is happening around it. When we talk about ideas and their logicality, we should remember that ideas are not just empty airy games, but have their effect on our minds and our ways of doing things in our daily life and in social reality.

In tracing the history of the concept of incommensurability, Waters mentions that Paul Feyerabend has been credited as a co-developer of this idea, but even Feyerabend 'complained early on that Kuhn had exaggerated the "dogmatic, authoritarian, and narrow-minded features of normal science".'[5] The problem starts with Kuhn's idea of the 'paradigm', because in Kuhn's understanding, a 'paradigm is an all-encompassing framework, and once one thinks of things in such global terms, it becomes very difficult to grasp the dynamics of change that take place at a snail's pace on the ground. Paradigms,' Waters remarks, 'seem to have walls around them with no chinks' (Ref. 4, p. 138). The popularity of Kuhn's concept, Waters argues, should be understood in the historical context of the time. The nineteenth-century notion of history as progress completely collapsed after the Second World War, and in the post-war social and intellectual context, when disillusionment with the confident idea of history as a continuous progress turned into a pessimistic outlook in the West, Kuhn, 'more than any other thinker, provided for a broad intellectual public a new set of ideas about how history works', that is, a much needed 'optimism' for the public to rethink history. 'The theory of incommensurability as a theory of history,' says Waters, 'held out the promise that perhaps people could wipe clean the

slate in a moment of crisis and know that every link to a horrific past and the idiocy that produced it could be severed' (Ref. 4, p. 141). That is to say, incommensurable paradigms offer the intellectual public the legitimacy of separating the past from the present, but also the legitimacy of separating different groups in self-enclosure and mutual incomprehension.

A concept that seems to deal with the specific problem of radical difference and change in scientific theories and terminologies suddenly exploded into the social and political reality, and had real and serious consequences. Waters complains that Kuhn's widely circulated concept has offered a 'justification for a resurgent tribalism' (Ref. 4, p. 144). In the humanities and social sciences in particular, this concept becomes 'the key idea that legitimates an identity politics that insists on the impossibility of thinking across groups'; it even 'legitimates a blinkered, absolutist, nonpluralist relativism' (Ref. 4, p. 145). Indeed, the general orientation of literary and cultural theories is tendentious, relativist, putting much emphasis on differences of all kinds, particularly racial, ethnic, gender, class, and other such ideologically charged and politically divisive differences, and of course also cultural differences that become the basis for arguing for the total incommensurability and untranslatability between languages and cultures. Kuhn was not unaware of such negative, though unintended, consequences, and in his later years he revised his earlier concept of radical incommensurability and reduced its scope to a more strictly linguistic sphere. He admits that when scientists working under different paradigms meet, they may indeed largely share a common language, but they have a radically different understanding of certain terms they use specifically. Kuhn now replaces the more general and radical incommensurability with the concept of untranslatability. 'Only for a small subgroup of (usually interdefined) terms and for sentences containing them do problems of translatability arise,' he says. Thus, incommensurability is localized as a linguistic problem, 'a claim about language, about meaning change.'[6] For Kuhn, however, the semantic changes of terms are so drastic that old and new terms become untranslatable. 'Incommensurability thus becomes a sort of untranslatability,' he says, 'localized to one or another area in which two lexical taxonomies differ' (Ref. 6, p. 93). Although the concept of untranslatability seems to cover a smaller area than does the earlier and more radical concept of incommensurability, it still has all the earlier implications of the impossibility of communication, the idea that translation or equivalence of value or meaning is impossible across unbridgeable linguistic gaps. In effect, untranslatability functions to legitimize the separation of languages, cultures, and communities just as Kuhn's earlier concept of incommensurability did. As a concept, however, untranslatability is a pure construct, for in reality translation, however difficult, partial, or imperfect it may be, has always worked to make human communication possible. This is just as true in scientific communication with special terms as it is true in daily communication couched in natural languages, and this is a historical fact, a common phenomenon in our lived experience, particularly in this age of globalization.

In translation studies, Water Benjamin's essay 'The Task of the Translator' has become a celebrated classic and has often been read as an endorsement of the concept

of untranslatability because at one point in that essay Benjamin says that: 'the word *Brot* means something different to a German than the word *pain* to a Frenchman, that these words are not interchangeable for them, that, in fact, they strive to exclude each other.' When Benjamin made that claim, however, he was 'distinguishing the intended object from the mode of intention,' and he immediately went on to add, as if to avoid possible misunderstanding: 'As to the intended object, however, the two words mean the very same thing.'[7] Using the terms of German phenomenology, Benjamin maintains that the mode of intention or the way in which the intended object manifests itself is always couched in a concrete language, and therefore its meaning is always specifically related to a particular linguistic and cultural context. Thus, the German *Brot* differs from the French *pain* in all their different connotations, but he also argues that different languages with their different modes of intention can intend 'the very same thing', or point to the same referential intentionality. It becomes evident that Benjamin's essay, when read carefully, does not endorse the idea of untranslatability. In fact, he emphatically points out that 'the translatability of linguistic creations ought to be considered even if men should prove unable to translate them.' (Ref. 7, p. 70). On a technical level, there are always cases where words from different languages do not overlap and therefore cannot be translated, but Benjamin's concept of translatability is rooted in the very nature of languages and their comparable intentionality, and thus it legitimates translatability on a theoretical or conceptual level.

When we search for a new paradigm for culture or the study of the world's different cultures, we must have a clear sense of a truly *new paradigm* that differs from Kuhn's understanding of paradigm with its implications of monadic isolationism and mutually incommensurable self-enclosures. The new paradigm for cultural or cross-cultural studies must be firmly grounded on the basic facts of human communication and the basic notion of translatability. This is, of course, not to neglect cultural and other differences at all, but always to contextualize differences so that they make sense in particular linguistic and cultural circumstances. At the same time, we must also understand the importance of difference for recognizing cultural characteristics, local specialties, features of communities and social groups, and all such particular items of collectives with which people identify themselves and form a sense of belonging and affiliation. Differences exist, however, not necessarily along cultural or ethnic lines, for very often we find that we may agree with someone from a different cultural or social group while we have different views from someone in our own culture or society. In other words, differences exist within cultures as well as between cultures, and it is certainly not true that cultural identities make translation impossible across linguistic and cultural boundaries. It is also important to realize the challenge to cross-cultural translatability, for, as John Sallis remarks, some people always dream of untranslatability. 'What would it mean not to translate?' asks Sallis. 'What would it mean to begin thinking beyond all translation?'[8] If thinking is speaking to oneself, as Plato and Kant have argued, it is already thinking in language and therefore, says Sallis, 'it will never have outstripped such translation. … In other words, for thinking to begin beyond such translation would mean its collapse into a

muteness that could mean nothing at all; incapable of signification, it would have ceased – if thinking is speaking to oneself – even to be thinking. It would have risked a captivation that falls short even of silence, if indeed silence is possible only for one who can speak' (Ref. 8, p. 2). But mystics and philosophical mysticism have always maintained that dream of silence, the dream of communication without or beyond language and translation.[9] Despite his effort to refute it, Sallis has to admit that 'attestations to untranslatability abound' (Ref. 8, p. 112). As mentioned above, in an intellectual climate that puts emphasis on fundamental differences, such attestations abound, particularly in talking about cultural or cross-cultural understanding, in which the idea of untranslatability denies different cultures the possibility to understand one another, especially when it comes to cross-cultural understanding between the East and the West.

Here we may look at another example, a book by Richard Nisbett, significantly entitled *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently… and Why*. The title of the book already makes it rather clear that Nisbett makes some very large general claims about the difference between a huge group of people called Asians and another huge group of people called Westerners, and argues that despite the consensus of cognitive scientists about some general commonality among all human beings, Western scholars in the humanities and social sciences have found differences between peoples and cultures much more important and crucial. Nisbett's huge categorization is really astonishing. Asians, he says, have a collective mentality while Westerners are individualistic, a difference that certainly sounds stereotypical:

> The collective or interdependent nature of Asian society is consistent with Asians' broad, contextual view of the world and their belief that events are highly complex and determined by many factors. The individualistic or independent nature of Western society seems consistent with the Western focus on particular objects in isolation from their context and with Westerners' belief that they can know the rules governing objects and therefore can control the objects' behaviour.[10]

The contrast here between a collective Asian mode of thinking and an individualistic Western mode of thinking is nothing new, but the degree of abstraction here is quite surprising. There are so many internal differences among both the Asians and the Westerners that such a neat contrast can hardly be useful as a way to understand either the Asians or the Westerners. Nisbett contrasts 'Asians' broad, contextual view of the world' with 'the Western focus on particular objects in isolation from their context.' He has also anecdotally quoted 'a brilliant student from China', who told him that the Chinese always hold a holistic view of the world and always look at everything in relation to other things, that they 'think you can't understand the part without understanding the whole'; while this Chinese student claims that the simpler and naive Westerners 'focus on salient objects or people instead of the larger picture; and they think they can control events because they know the rules that govern the behaviour of objects' (Ref 10, p. xiv). Perhaps it is asking too much of Nisbett's 'brilliant student from China' to know anything about the 'hermeneutic circle' in the German philosophical tradition that argues precisely that understanding is always

moving from the parts to the whole, and from the whole to the parts in mutual illumination. But we may expect Nisbett to know better. Not only is this student from China woefully ignorant of the Western tradition, but he does not know much about the Chinese tradition, either. As for grouping all Westerners together, perhaps I may quote a passage from the German poet and writer Heinrich Heine when he was trying to write a book about German religion and philosophy for French readers. 'In recent times the French believe they could attain an understanding of Germany if they made themselves acquainted with the best products of our literature. By so doing,' Heine declares, 'they have merely raised themselves from a state of total ignorance to the level of superficiality. The best products of our literature will remain for them only mute blossoms, the whole German mind a dreary puzzle, so long as they do not know the significance of religion and philosophy in Germany.'[11] Apparently, the Germans and the French have trouble understanding each other unless they make the effort, so the idea that all Germans and all French plus all other Europeans and Americans think alike as 'Westerners' is ludicrous and false, just as ridiculous as it is to assume that all Asians, be it Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Mongolians, Indians, or Indonesians, think exactly in the same way. It is amazing that such sweeping and obviously false generalizations could have been presented as serious scholarly arguments in our time.

But Nisbett has made some more specific claims. About the Greeks, he says, they 'more than any other ancient peoples, and in fact more than most people on the planet today, had a remarkable sense of personal *agency* – the sense that they were in charge of their own lives and free to act as they chose. One definition of happiness for the Greeks was that it consisted of being able to exercise their powers in pursuit of excellence in a life free from constraints' (Ref. 10, pp. 2–3, emphasis in orginal). I am sure we can find Greek examples to support such a robust view, but it is also a critical commonplace that ancient Greek tragedies are often tragedies of destiny, of which Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* can be seen as a classic example, in which the striking ancient Greek idea is precisely a remarkable sense of the lack of personal agency, the recognition that individual human beings are pathetically limited in their knowledge and wisdom, and that they are not 'in charge of their own lives and free to act as they chose.' Oedipus is a heroic figure and has taken great actions, including solving the notorious riddle of the Sphinx. The tragic sense of fate comes out clearly, however, precisely in the movement of the play in which each and every action Oedipus takes to avoid his predetermined destiny pushes him relentlessly towards that horrible destination. In other words, his action, though consciously performed as his own, lacks the real meaning of human agency. At the end of *Oedipus the King*, the Chorus sums up that sense of destiny and expresses a notion of happiness very different from what Nisbett has described:

> Before that final day when one can say
> his life has reached its end with no distress or grief,
> no man should be called happy.[12]

What we have here is a deep sense of tragic pathos, a sense of the helplessness of man trapped in an unpredictable and indeed unknowable future destiny. Who is to

say that what Sophocles expressed so effectively here is not typically Greek? 'Oedipus confronts the mystery of being alive in a world that does not correspond to a pattern of order or justice satisfactory to the human mind,' as Charles Segal argues. 'He places us in a tragic universe where we have to ask whether the horrible suffering we witness is all due to design or to chance, whether our lives are random or entirely determined. If everything is by accident – a view to which the modern reader is probably more inclined than the ancient one – then life seems absurd. If it is all by design, then the gods seem cruel or unjust, and life is hell.'[13] The play may indeed have different interpretations, but there is certainly a tremendous sense of 'a mysterious doom or destiny, will of the gods' (Ref. 13, p. 75). What we see in Greek tragedies is just the opposite of what Nisbett would have us believe, i.e. that the ancient Greeks 'were in charge of their own lives and free to act as they chose.' If Nisbett's sweeping generalization about the Greek notion of happiness and personal agency does not convince us of its validity, how can we trust him to come up with a general truth about all Asians, who are so numerous and have such complex and different racial, linguistic, social, and cultural differences? The point is again that differences exist within cultures as much as between or among cultures, and it is often the case that people make sweeping generalizations and dichotomous claims out of the will to differentiate, if not out of ignorance or lack of understanding, despite similarities and affinities in reality and available textual evidences.

The reality is that across social and cultural boundaries, understanding and translation are always possible. Now, of any language, literary expressions often constitute the most beautiful, the most sophisticated, and sometimes also the most difficult part, and many have argued that literary translation, particularly that of poetry, is impossible. Not only do we have Robert Frost's often-heard remark that 'poetry is what gets lost in translation'; as Qian Zhongshu tells us, the German writer Christian Morgenstern puts it even more bluntly and sarcastically when he says that 'there is only bad and less bad translation (*Es gibt nur schlechte Übersetzung und weniger schlechte*).'[14] But again, despite all difficulties, literary works have always been translated for appreciation beyond their originally intended readership and have been given another lease of life in a different world in a different medium. Ironically, even the famous diatribe attributed to Frost, 'poetry is what gets lost in translation', becomes world famous when it is translated into many languages. The importance of translation is especially highlighted in the concept of world literature, which is on the rise recently everywhere in different parts of the world. '*World literature,*' as David Damrosch puts it, '*is writing that gains in translation*.'[15] A literary work becomes a work of world literature when it is read and appreciated globally by readers in different social and cultural conditions, and most likely in translation. 'To use translations,' says Damrosch, 'means to accept the reality that texts come to us mediated by existing frameworks of reception and interpretation' (Ref. 15, p. 295). World literature presumes translatability as a given, and it may thus provide us with a new model for cross-cultural studies. Great European canonical works in world literature, e.g., Sophocles, Dante, Rabelais, Goethe, Dostoyevsky, Balzac, Tolstoy and many others become well-known in the world in translations, even Shakespeare and many other

works in English also come to be appreciated in translation. This is certainly true of great non-European works as well as European works from what are considered to be minor traditions, which have so far not acquired the global reputation they deserve. For such works, world literature now offers a great opportunity for global reception in translation. This notion of translation has little to do with the much emphasized subjectivity, visibility or invisibility of the translator that have been made so much of in translation studies. Instead, translation as essential for world literature has its focus on understanding and communication, on the equivalence of meaning and values across languages and cultures, and on the universality of hermeneutic questions despite differences and the possibilities of misunderstanding. Translation means not only a one-to-one equivalence, but involves annotation, explanation, and interpretation; it requires tireless efforts to make communication possible. The recognition of cross-cultural translatability is the first step towards a new paradigm in the study of different cultures in this globalized world of ours. Let us take the first step and go further in promoting the mutual understanding of different cultures and traditions, and eventually working toward a more peaceful and better world in which we can all live with our own traditions and the tolerance and respect for those of others.

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